DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 601 RC 019 571

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TITLE Potpourri of Resources To Tap Gifted Education in Rural Areas.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 7p.; In: Montgomery, Diane, Ed. Rural Partnerships: Working Together. Proceedings of the Annual National Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (14th, Austin, Texas, March 23-26, 1994); see RC 019 557.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Resources; Educational Needs; *Educational Resources; *Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; Program Development; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; Special Education; *Special Education Teachers; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses problems in providing educational services to gifted students in rural areas and discusses feasible solutions. Rural schools face numerous obstacles such as small numbers of identified gifted students; limited resources and funding; locations distant from universities, libraries, and cultural activities; difficulty in obtaining trained personnel; and differences in cultural values. Rural schools need to explore programming options such as developing regional centers for gifted programs, providing opportunities for students to participate in independent study, matching gifted students with mentors, developing residential programs, and holding regional or national academic competitions. Capitalizing on the strengths of the rural community entails creating a database of community resources, implementing oral history projects, and encouraging student involvement in community problem-solving projects. The use of available technology such as videotapes, telecommunications, videodiscs, interactive television, and distance learning programs can alleviate the isolation of rural schools. Equally important is the need for teachers of gifted students to develop a professional network to provide support to their programs, and to have opportunities to receive ongoing training through regional workshops, summer institutes, distance learning, and correspondence courses. School districts and individual teachers of the gifted need encouragement and professional networking to locate solutions that are best for their local communities. (LP)

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Potpourri of Resources To Tap Gifted Education In Rural Areas

Introduction

Providing appropriate programming for gifted students in rural areas, such as West Virginia, brings unique challenges to administrators and teachers. Schools need to explore alternative means of program delivery, curriculum development, teacher development, and support services. Small schools and their surrounding communities have special strengths that teachers can utilize. New technologies can also provide workable solutions. Cooperative or regional programs with a variety of other agencies can be used to deliver appropriate services.

During the early days of gifted education, professional conferences and journals focused on practical sharing of classroom ideas, but have since shifted to being more of a source of reporting results of research studies. Teachers and administrators still need a source for idea networking. Those in the field of education could profit from conferences and journals sharing this task, as well as looking for additional means of idea sharing such as electronic mail messages and computer discussion groups. Teachers and administrators in rural areas need to have a network for sharing workable ideas to provide appropriate services to gifted students where resources are sparse.

Problems of Rural Gifted: The Theoretical Foundation

While rural communities have many strengths, these rural schools are also faced with numerous problems in providing qualitatively different services for gifted students: small numbers of identified students; more limited resources; scarcity of funding; distance from universities, libraries, and other cultural activities; difficult in obtaining trained personnel; and different cultural values.

Fewer students makes it more difficult to provide specific programming for the gifted in the local school in a cost-effective manner. Smaller school populations also makes it less likely that advanced courses (advanced placement, college preparatory) will be offered at the secondary level on a regular basis. Smaller populations also limit the funding sources available to the schools.

Gifted students need the interaction of other students with similar interests and abilities. They need the opportunity to develop skills in leadership and group dynamics, as well as the opportunity to discuss their feelings, with other gifted students. However, a frequent problem in rural areas is the lone student in a school, serviced on an individual basis by a special teacher.

Small rural districts are usually located a great distance from sources of support for both the teachers and students. Teachers who need to take training courses to get necessary certification have to travel great distances to get coursework. These teachers usually have less access to on-going professional development. Additionally, universities can provide resources for students through use of libraries and contact with faculty members. Universities and larger urban areas also provide cultural events, as well as offering specialized instruction in the performing arts.

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Cultural values and experiences in rural areas can also make it less likely for students to be identified and for gifted programming to be considered important within the school system. Rural communities, having been more isolated, tend to be less accepting of diversity of beliefs and behaviors and also show less acceptance of the importance of education (Pendarvis, Howley, and Howley, 1990). Because there are few job opportunities for more educated individuals, young people who have attained higher educational training usually need to move out of the community to obtain appropriate jobs.

Varying the Variables

In looking for solutions to the problem of providing appropriate services to gifted students in rural areas, there are several areas that need to be considered: 1) identification of students; 2) administration and delivery of program; 3) curriculum development; 4) special social and emotional needs; and 5) teacher support.

Rural areas are less likely to successfully identify gifted students using standardized intelligence and achievement tests (Spicker, 1992). Nontraditional methods of identification need to be explored.

Larger schools in urban areas can make use of the school-based resource room because there will be a large enough student population to have sufficient students to provide an appropriate program. Urban high schools have large enough populations to provide the wide range of specialized college preparatory courses and advanced placement courses to challenge these gifted students. Small rural schools usually do not have enough students to provide these same services, so these schools must explore a variety of other alternative methods of providing the necessary services for their gifted students.

Because of the different cultural values, experiences, and backgrounds, the needs of the rural gifted students are frequently quite different than those of urban students. Because educational achievements are less valued, more counseling needs to be provided to encourage students to plan for a college education. Since cultural experiences are more limited, the program for the gifted needs to plan on exposing students to a variety of cultural activities and events.

Isolated communities are frequently less tolerant of diversity, so creativity, risk-taking, and the taking of varied points of view might need to be emphasized more within the curriculum.

Sources of Solutions

The **rural community** can be a source of talented individuals that can be utilized in supporting the program for the gifted. In any given rural community there is a wealth of talent and interests to tap, as well as their creativity in exploring solutions to their local problems. A database can be developed cataloging the unique talents and interests available in the local community. Students can become involved in local issues in their community. Increased involvement in the community can also contribute to better public relations for programming for the gifted.

The **school system** can make use of existing educational resources within the district; resources that are not currently viewed as being part of the "gifted" program. School personnel can be surveyed as to how their skills can serve the needs of different students. Existing bus transportation routes can be utilized to transport gifted students to centers so that appropriate groupings can be accomplished. Strengths and interests of groups of students can be matched with appropriate extra-curricular activities or competitions.

The use of **technology** can be an exciting source of new solutions to this 'old' problem. Telecommunications, interactive television, distance learning, computers for both delivering instruction and for student production of materials are all new means of delivering instruction to both teachers and students. This technology can become a means of overcoming the obstacles of distance from informational resources, from cultural activities, and from interaction with other students.

Potpourri of Possibilities

1. Programming Options

Small schools need to explore additional options other than the school-based resource room because there are usually not enough students within one school. School districts can explore the option of having centers within their one district, or even looking at **regional centers** and combining the sparse populations across two or more school districts. This allows students to benefit from the interaction with other students who have similar interests and abilities. One creative solution to this problem is to house the center for the program for the gifted at the regional vocational training center where existing bus transportation is already established.

One-day **seminars** on topics of special interest can serve as a means of bringing together students on a district or regional basis. Students can prepare for these experiences independently through reading lists. Individual teachers can take turns in coordinating each of these seminars.

Small rural schools can explore means of providing opportunities for **acceleration** and **independent study** in order to provide appropriate challenges to gifted students. Teachers throughout the school district, who are supportive of these options and who also have the necessary expertise in a subject area, can be identified and utilized as needed.

Students with specialized interests and needs can be matched with a **mentor**, an individual with talents and skills that can be passed on to the student. Mentors can direct independent study projects or research projects based on their own careers or interests. Mentors can serve as role models, passing on educational aspirations, as well as specific information about their career and the necessary educational training for that particular career.

Residential programs for the gifted are an additional option that has been utilized in several states, particularly in North Carolina. These programs allow students the advantages of stronger educational programming and greater resources than might be available in their small local school. Many of these residential programs focus on the very specialized talents of these students. Some of these residential programs are designed for the regular school year, while others, such as The Johns Hopkins CTY program and many states Governor's Schools, such as in West Virginia, are summer programs.

Regional or national **competitions** help to establish higher expectations for these students, as well as offering the opportunity to meet other students with similar interests and abilities. Competitions in focused areas will encourage them to develop more advanced skills and to develop risk-taking, higher-level thinking skills, and leadership and group dynamics. Teachers with the necessary background and expertise from throughout the school district can become the coaches for these competitions.

2. Local Community Options

Small schools will frequently be the focus of the rural community by serving as the local community center. People within small communities usually all know each other and considerable

networking is already being done. Rural communities are also more stable than urban neighborhoods. Teachers of the gifted need to capitalize on these strengths of the local community.

Schools, or teachers within the schools, need to survey the community and create a **database of the community resources**; creating a list of individuals careers, interests, and hobbies that might be utilized to support school activities. Questionnaires can be sent home to families in the school; teachers throughout the school district can be surveyed as to who they have utilized in the past; students can be challenged to search for people with special interests that they might know. This community resource database can be utilized for speakers for groups, for identifying possible mentors, or for contacting for specialized information.

The use of **oral history projects** can actively involve students in their local community, helping them to identify the strengths of their area and helping them to take pride in their background. Many important skills can be developed through these oral history projects including research skills used in preparing for the interview, questioning skills used in developing the interview, communication skills in carrying out the interview and writing up the results, and technology skills used in preparing a final product.

The involvement in **community problem-solving projects** are another means of actively involving students in authentic problem-solving. Students are challenged to identify a real problem in their local area, to brainstorm possible solutions to this problem, and then to plan and carry out a plan of action to implement the selected solution. This type of project can involve students in working with many different individuals and groups in their community.

3. Technology Options

New technology is helping break down barriers such as the isolation of rural schools. Videotapes, telecommunications, videodiscs, interactive television, and distance learning bring all schools, despite their geographic location, into the mainstream of information sources.

Videotapes allow students to hear from experts in the field or to view a cultural event such as an opera or ballet not available locally. Students can easily create videotapes which they can exchange with other classes in order to interact with other students who have similar interests and abilities.

Videodiscs allow students to take field trips without leaving their local school. They can access the treasures of the Museum of Art or the Smithsonian. They can utilize these videodiscs to retrieve information and then also make use of them in creating presentations of their own.

Telecommunications allow students to communicate with other students anywhere in the world. It can be used to develop a more global perspective on world issues through exchange of electronic mail messages among students from around the world on on-line discussion groups such as KidCafe. Telecommunications can link students with mentors anywhere in the world that share a similar interest. Telecommunications provide students with a source of informational resources such as the electronic books at the Library of Congress.

Interactive television and **distance learning** allow small schools to provide specialized, upper level classes where there is not a large enough student population to warrant a teacher. Foreign languages, upper level science, and advanced placement classes are frequently delivered through these means.

4. Teacher Development Options

Small school districts need to explore additional options for providing all of the necessary services to their gifted students. Teachers of the gifted might need to take on the role of being the facilitators of locating all the other professionals needed to meet the specific needs of their students. The student with exceptional abilities might need the services of the math teacher in providing appropriate acceleration or enrichment.

In order to overcome the feelings of isolation, teachers of the gifted need to develop a professional network to provide support to their program. This can begin from within their local school with teachers that are supportive of what they are doing. However, this also needs to come from other teachers of the gifted. Teachers need to make contacts with other teachers of the gifted through professional organizations in their state or regional area. Teachers need to be provided with the opportunity to attend state and national conferences in order to develop this professional networking. State and national organizations need to be challenged to support more teacher-to-teacher networking. Teachers also need to take advantage of telecommunications for this professional networking. Electronic mail messages and on-line discussion groups can promote exchange of ideas and provide professional support. General on-line discussion groups such as KidSphere can provide ideas for general classroom activities, while special discussion groups such as TAG-L can focus on the special needs of gifted students and programs.

School districts, as well as teacher training institutions, need to investigate alternative means of providing on-going training to teachers of the gifted. Regional workshops, summer institutes, distance learning, correspondence courses can all be utilized to provide professional development opportunities for teachers.

Conclusions and Summary

Small schools, in isolated areas, lack many of the educational and financial resources of larger schools in urban areas. Teachers face the isolation of being the only teacher of the gifted in their district. Students also face this same isolation with small number of students identified in the schools. Teachers and administrators need to creatively explore the workable solutions in order to provide appropriate services to the rural gifted. Teachers need to make more use of professional conferences and journals to share workable solutions, as well as looking for new means of networking such as through e-mail and on-line discussion groups.

Teachers and administrators need to make use of the strengths of the rural community, the educational system, and the wide range of new technologies in looking for workable solutions. Schools need to consider non-traditional and creative options of programming and teacher development. Workable solutions are available, but school districts and individual teachers of the gifted need encouragement and professional networking to locate the solutions that is best for their local community.

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